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SUBJECT: FLYING BY NIGHT: TAJIK AVIATION ILL-EQUIPPED, UNDER-FUNDED

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Tajikistan's aviation sector faces many challenges: lack of capacity and oversight, limited flights, high costs, poor planning, aging infrastructure, and unrealistic expectations. During a recent visit to Dushanbe by senior Moscow-based Federal Aviation Administration representative Brian Staurseth, officials at Tajikistan's Civil Aviation Department and flag carrier Tajik Air appeared well aware of the problems, and some areas were being addressed. But many problems are fundamental to the country: low wages, massive corruption, and poor planning. To fix these will require a broader effort. End summary.

LACK OF CAPACITY AT OVERSIGHT AGENCIES

¶2. (SBU) Tajikistan's aviation sector is poorly regulated, its oversight agencies are underfunded, and many of those charged with regulating the industry moonlight for the very companies they oversee. Two bodies are responsible for civil aviation in Tajikistan: the Ministry of Transportation and Communications deals with policy and is responsible for oversight of air and other transportation operations. The Ministry negotiates air transportation agreements with other countries, opens new air routes, and designates operators. The Civil Aviation Department, subordinated to the Ministry, is responsible for flight safety, aircraft investigation, and other technical oversight. It has four divisions: airports, use of airspace, aviation security and flight operations, and technical regulation.

¶3. (SBU) According to Aziz Nabiev, head of the Civil Aviation Department, his agency has only 22 staff members, and is funded entirely out of the state budget, unlike civil aviation agencies in many countries where operations are funded partially from ticket sales or other sources of revenue. Salaries are extremely low, and many officials moonlight as pilots to make ends meet. Deputy Minister of Transportation and Communications Firuz Hamroev regularly flies for Tajikistan's national carrier. Hamroev admitted this was a conflict of interest: "I fly for Tajik Air. Technically, this is a violation: I shouldn't work for an entity that I regulate. But I have to make money. Anyway, we're pretty tough on Tajik Air." Moscow-based FAA representative Brian Staurseth acknowledged that adequately funding civil aviation authorities is a worldwide problem, but many countries are finding creative solutions. Croatia, for example, recently agreed to increase salaries for airline safety

officials, guaranteeing state salaries for specialists that matched those of the private sector.

MINIMAL INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS

14. (SBU) Compared to its Central Asian neighbors, Tajikistan is underserved by international flights. Until airBaltic inaugurated bi-weekly service to Riga in June, the only western airline to serve Dushanbe was Turkish Air, with two flights a week to Istanbul. The only well-served route is to Moscow, with four daily flights, though these are often canceled for one reason or another. Other destinations served include Dubai; Urumchi, China; Kabul; Tehran; and several cities in Russia. Dushanbe's connections are so poor that many here, westerners included, fly to Kabul to connect to onward destinations. A new route to Frankfurt on Somon Air began operating last week, but ticket sales have been dismal: only five seats were booked on the first flight, and three on the second. A manager at Somon Air complained the airline had done no homework to prepare for and market the flight, and he expected the route to fail. A planned Tajik Air flight to Munich has been in the works for almost a year, but has yet to get off the ground.

15. (SBU) While Tajikistan is a poor country with a relatively small population, and Dushanbe is not a major business or tourism destination, most believe that with proper planning a reputable airline could easily fill several more routes to Europe. Indeed, anyone flying here on Turkish Air's two weekly flights from Istanbul will note that despite the ungodly hour and roundtrip prices approaching US \$1,000, the planes are

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always full. When asked why Dushanbe's connections are so poor, Hamroev said it was because Tajikistan lacked bilateral agreements for air service with many countries in Europe. "We would love to have an Air France or a British Airways here, but they are not interested in flying to Dushanbe."

16. (SBU) However, Turkish Air has long sought to add more flights from Istanbul, but has been denied permission by the Tajik government, which is apparently concerned that the additional flights would draw business away from Tajik Air's single weekly flight on the same route. We have been told that until Tajik Air can be assured of parity with Turkish Air on the Dushanbe-Istanbul route, Turkish Air's requests will continue to be denied. Consumers have shown a marked preference for Turkish Air over Tajikistan's national carrier, however, and it is unclear that Tajik Air can find the customers without dramatically slashing prices.

17. (SBU) Dushanbe civil aviation officials see the new airBaltic flight as a major success: the flights got up and running after only four months of planning. The case demonstrates the importance of direct presidential involvement, however, since the decision to open the route emerged during a meeting between the Latvian and Tajik leaders in February. In theory Somon Air will launch a matching route to Riga at some point, though there is no indication of when. (Comment: The unwillingness of Western aviation authorities to open their airports to Tajik Air would be a significant barrier for Western airlines potentially interested in flying to Dushanbe. End comment.)

THE SAME OLD STORY: PROBLEMS WITH TASHKENT

18. (SBU) Though there are direct flights from Dushanbe to only nine countries, Tajikistan has bilateral air agreements with 22 countries, and five more are due to be signed soon with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Georgia, Moldova, and Mongolia. Conspicuously absent from the list is Uzbekistan. Due to continuously strained relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, there has been no regularly scheduled air service between the two countries since May 12, 1992. Sources agree, however, that this route would be very profitable. Uzbek and Tajik populations are heavily intermixed, and many inhabitants have relatives in the neighboring country. In Soviet times there were fourteen flights a day between the two republics, serving not only the capitals, but several secondary cities as well. Over the past 15 years, according to Hamroev, the Tajik government has made serious attempts to sign a bilateral air agreement with Tashkent. Each time, the paperwork appears to disappear into a void after crossing into Uzbekistan by diplomatic courier.

19. (SBU) The most recent attempt was in February 2009, when an Uzbek delegation arrived in Dushanbe to discuss bilateral issues. It was widely reported the Uzbeks were interested in renewing flights as soon as possible. Hamroev said they wanted to have planes running in time for Navruz holiday in the second half of March. The Tajiks quickly dusted off a three-year-old Uzbek proposal, made some edits, and sent it to Tashkent for approval. Once again, however, they never heard a response. During a recent visit to Moscow, Nabiev ran into a working-level Uzbek counterpart, who said that they had received the paperwork, and were eager to begin operations, but "we don't have the green light from above. This thing is being held up at the highest levels."

FLYING BY NIGHT

10. (U) A frequent complaint about international flights to Dushanbe is timing: the few flights connecting Dushanbe to the outside world almost all arrive and depart in the middle of the night. Nabiev provided several explanations, none of them entirely satisfactory. He noted that Dushanbe has a very hot summer climate, and planes have considerably less lift in high

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temperatures, especially Soviet-built aircraft, which can seat 30 to 35 more passengers at night. For this reason, flights delayed in the morning often do not take off until the following evening. Nabiev said western aircraft were less subject to heat-related lift differences, and Turkish Air and airBaltic had their own reasons for scheduling night flights, probably based on the airport slots available in Istanbul and Riga. He speculated that more competitive routes from these airports to Europe are given more appealing time slots. He suggested as well that Dushanbe's early departures give customers the ability to connect through Istanbul and Riga to other destinations.

NOWHERE TO FLY, NOTHING TO FLY THERE ON

11. (U) Both Hamroev and Nabiev lamented that Tajikistan's air operations have shrunk dramatically since the collapse of the USSR. During the Soviet period, the country had 47 operational airports. Of these, only 15 are currently maintained, though not in consistent use. There are four international airports, Dushanbe, Khojand (in Soghd province), and Qurghonteppa and Kulob (both in Khatlon province). The remaining eleven local

airports are in Ayni, Penjakent, and Isfara (in Soghd); Gharm and Jirgatal (in the central region), Parkhar and Khovaling (in Khatlon); and Ishkashim, Khorog, Rushob, and Vanj (in the Badakhshon Autonomous Region). The other Soviet-era airports went into disuse for several reasons. First, with the end of the Soviet Union Moscow stopped providing fuel. Tajik authorities cannot afford fuel to serve most regional airports. Second, because of increased operations costs, Tajik Air cannot afford to maintain routes to less-used airports, and passengers cannot afford to pay the real costs of the flights. Hamroev said that even tickets on existing routes, such as Dushanbe-Khojand, are sold below cost, on direct orders from the government. Working on this budget had hamstrung Tajik Air's ability to upgrade its fleet and operations. Finally, the Antonov-2, formerly the aircraft of choice on short-haul flights, is no longer maintained and Tajik Air lacked the funds to buy a suitable replacement.

¶12. (U) According to officials at Tajik Air, the airline has 25 operating aircraft: four Tupelov-154s, seven Yakovlev-40s, four Antonov-24s/26s, three Antonov-28s, four helicopters, one Boeing 757 leased from ILFC, and two Boeing 737-200s leased from East Air. (Note: The condition of all of these aircraft is not known; some reports list smaller numbers. End note.) The rest of its assets, including several Antonov-2s and other obsolete aircraft, must be regarded as scrap. Half a decade ago Tajik Air was looking into renovating its fleet with new Russian Tupelov-214s, but has since decided to work with Boeing through its Moscow representative office. Several Tajik pilots and crews have traveled to the United States in recent years for flight training. Somon Air and Tajik Air's Boeings are maintained in Turkey under maintenance agreements.

EFFORTS TO REVITALIZE AVIATION SECTOR

¶13. (SBU) To revitalize the aviation sector the central government recently followed a World Bank recommendation and divided Tajik Air operations into three entities: the airline, the airports, and the air navigation system. Each of the four main airports is to be independent; the remaining airports, including Khorog, are part of Dushanbe airport. While the division formally occurred in January, officials admit that there is still a considerable amount of crossover between the entities: they often share staff and responsibilities, and the three regional airports do not yet operate independently. The regional airports are incapable of supporting themselves, according to Hamroev.

COMMENT: SHOOTING THE MOON?

¶14. (SBU) Tajikistan faces many hurdles in developing a safe and effective aviation sector. Its population is small and poor,

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its terrain is rugged, and its relations with neighbors are strained. Yet many of the country's aviation problems are self-inflicted. Despite a clear demand for connections to Europe, officials stubbornly refuse to allow more Turkish Air flights to land in Dushanbe, while failing to make the changes necessary to make Tajik Air competitive. Tajik Air and Somon Air have demonstrated a glaring inability to plan for and market new routes, and the new Somon Air flight to Frankfurt appears to be a failure. The government has not created effective, adequately-funded oversight agencies. On the positive side, the aviation officials we spoke with were candid, willing to talk about their problems, and appeared genuinely interested in

seeing real change. In light of the problems they face, however, Somon Air's latest plans to fly to New York must be regarded as likely as a Tajik flight to the moon.

End comment.
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